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ABSTRACT

The U. S. Commissioner of Education proposes a new role for the neighborhood elementary school as a comprehensive child development center as well as an institution of learning. The neighborhood elementary schools should become the means of delivery of comprehensive child development services to the home and neighborhood for four reasons: (1) the neighborhood school is situated in a strategic location where services can be easily dispensed to the homes; (2) the neighborhood school can provide public health services without costly duplication of facilities and personnel; (3) the neighborhood school can provide social and rehabilitative services offered by State and Federal assistance programs; and (4) the neighborhood school can also function as a center for early childhood education services. Those individuals or boards who have the control of the schools should take the initiative to redefine the role and expand the mission of the neighborhood elementary school as a child development center. The major thrust of the States in the field of early childhood development should be to the home through the school districts' neighborhood elementary schools. (CS)

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# The Family, the Young Child, and the School*

by
T. H. Bell
U.S. Commissioner of Education

Early childhood development is rapidly becoming one of those subjects about which we educators seem to be learning a lot more than we know what to do with. To paraphrase Mark Twain I might say everyone talks about early childhood development but no one is doing anything about it--at least in our public school system.

I believe the evidence is now overwhelming that the experiences of those first few months and years in a child's life determine, to a great extent, whether he will be equipped to enjoy and profit from the mainstream of American life. A child's pride and pleasure in himself, his ability to relate to others, to reason, to imagine--all these are largely established characteristics by the time he comes through the school door.

It has been shown rather conclusively that these characteristics can be stimulated and developed, or can be stunted, by the experiences of the child in his first three or four years and beginning in the first few months of life.

When we begin discussing how a child's early experiences can be made stimulating and constructive, and by whom, honest differences arise. But few would take exception to the proposition that interested, alert parents can provide any child his or her best start in life.

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*Before the 10th Annual Conference of South Carolina School Officials, Myrtle Beach, July 12, 1974.

There is no evidence that any institutionalized program is the equilavent of parental care, even if the parents aren't too alert. The greatest damage is done to children not by stupid care or overzealous concern, but by neglect. The great experience of early childhood is finding out that you are someone who counts in a very interesting world. And there is reason to believe that if that experience does not come in the years of early development all later experience is likely to be tinged with a sense of futility and doubt.

It seems to me that no issue could be of greater concern to educators today. I believe we have more than enough knowledge to justify action and I am going to propose to you today a means of acting in the here and now. I hope to define a new role for the neighborhood elementary school as a comprehensive child development center as well as an institution of learning.

If asked why I propose the elementary school as the child development center for a neighborhood I might reply, with as much logic as the mountain climbers, "because it's there." The elementary school is the institution closest to the homes and to the families where early childhood experiences happen. It is an organic part of the neighborhood in which a child lives. It is a part of the definition of a neighborhood. But above all, the schools are coming increasingly to recognize that, in order to serve the educational needs of the children in their charge, they must first be neighborly.

All across this great country we have thousands of elementary schools located in our centers of population--close to where the people live--reaching into millions of homes every day. Here in South Carolina alone

you have more than 700 elementary schools. We must, as I see it, take much greater advantage than is now being done to utilize these schools as a means of helping reach more fully the American dream of equality of opportunity for all.

This is my rationale for suggesting this new role for the neighborhood school:

The great ideal for American public education is to provide each student an opportunity to develop his full potential as a human being. We aspire to bring to full fruition all the latent talents of all children. This, I am sure, sounds a bit trite. But it is our aspiration for public education in America.

When we meet in some public gatherings--such as monthly PTA meetings across this huge nation--we stand, salute the flag, and recite the pledge of allegiance. We end this pledge with the well-known phrase: ". . . with liberty and justice for all." Over the past decade, we have been engaged as a nation in a struggle to bring full meaning to this highly significant phrase. In a sense, justice for all means equality of opportunity. It means education to meet our individual needs. It means education that will bring out the best that is in us. . . bring out the joy of fulfillment when we do our best.

Today's preschool children--those millions of toddlers in the residential neighborhoods of this country--are waiting to become our elementary school students in a few years. As educators we have an enormous stake in how these children develop physically, emotionally, and intellectually. These are the ones whose lives we should be touching through an expanded role for the neighborhood school. If we

are to help the next generation to surpass ours in intelligence, good health, positive attitudes, and over-all ability to cope with their problems we must begin at the origin point of these desired capacities.

All over the nation today, poor health, under-developed intellects, emotional and psychological problems are being nurtured in millions of preschool children. All of this is coming from the enormous impact of early life experiences that demean and detract from human potentia. . . that rob the potential of small children.

We can ill afford these losses in human ability. The capacity of each person to care for himself, to be positively active in private and public matters, and to be productive in our economy touches all of us. To the extent that we fail to develop human potential we all lose.

Our neighborhood elementary schools should become the means of delivery of comprehensive child development services to the home and neighborhood. Close geographically to the people, they should become much closer psychologically. As I see it, the elementary school can become the channel for delivery of these services for the following four reasons:

1. In the urban ghetto, in the small rural town, and in the suburbs, the elementary school sits in this very strategic place where services can be dispensed to homes and where the child from birth to five years can feel the positive influence of the school with an expanded responsibility to function as a child development center and as an institution totally dedicated to child advocacy.

2. The neighborhood school, in its role as a child development center, should provide public health services to preschoolers. Those regular check-ups to find medical and dental problems at the earliest possible time in the child's life will mean better health and a happier life. This service is, of course, particularly important in low-income areas where parents may lack both the knowledge and the financial means. By providing such services from the school we can avoid costly duplication of facilities and personnel. By providing these services, the child in the ghetto gets a better break early in his life when it counts the most for him and when it counts the most for society as a whole.
3. This neighborhood school--functioning as a comprehensive child development center--can also provide social and rehabilitative services offered by State and Federal assistance programs. Both parent and child can be reached through the school. Both parent and child can learn to look to the school as a source of information and assistance. Public health and welfare personnel would, under this concept, coordinate their activities through the school and in harmony with the educational program.
4. The neighborhood school can also function as a center for early childhood education services in the attendance area it serves. Like physical, emotional, and attitudinal development, the intellectual strength of the total organism is greatly influenced by how the twig is bent while a seedling and before it even begins to take the shape of a mature tree.

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Dr. Benjamin Bloom, in his well-known studies of how human characteristics are formed, has called our attention to the need for better programs to build the child's cognitive powers long before he enters school. Bloom has concluded from his studies that when a trait is just beginning to unfold in the long and gradual process of growing to maturity that we can greatly influence the ultimate extent of its development. In this regard it is important to emphasize that some forces are always shaping the child's development. These are, of course, for good or ill. But they are working all through the child's early lifetime.

For example: When the child begins to understand words and their meaning, he is building cognitive power. His vocabulary development is very vital to much of what he subsequently learns. When the child first starts to understand spoken words is the time to positively influence this development. The child's experience should be rewarding. His ability in communicating with others throughout his life can be greatly enhanced or damaged before he reaches school. Parents may be unwittingly causing retardation in the child's vocabulary development. If aware of a few simple principles, however, they may easily enhance their child's development.

The same applies to all aspects of the child's development of his abilities in almost every one of the complex functions that he will master. Persons in education, medicine, social and psychological service areas need to help parents to understand and utilize these great possibilities for human betterment. I place emphasis here on helping parents help their preschool children because, as I see it, there is actually no other practical, cost-effective way to provide these vital services.

I want to discuss further the role of the parent and the neighborhood elementary school in sponsoring home-based preschool education.

The home is the place for most of the early learning experiences of the child because that is where the child will be spending over 95 percent of his time during the first five years of his life. School districts have a responsibility for sponsoring home-based preschool education. But school districts should avoid extending formal institutionalized schooling down to ages two or three years. I don't think it is wise to extend public school education below kindergarten. The school should, however, assume responsibility for helping parents to offer a program in the home. Here are seven reasons for this position:

1. The institutionalized preschool approach will be enormously expensive and not very productive.
2. Elementary school nursery programs can reach the child for no longer than two hours per day.
3. Children of two and three years of age are far too young and immature for the public school setting.
4. Early childhood education should begin no later than age four months. Needless to say, the school cannot offer nursery school for this age.
5. The home will still have the child for 22 hours each week day plus 24 hours on all other days when school is not in session.
6. Parent responsibility for early childhood teaching may be somewhat abdicated to the school when it must be primarily the duty of the parents.

7. There is more than a small chance that schools will do more harm than good by taking very small children from a mother's nurture at too early an age.

The neighborhood elementary school can provide parents of preschool children with the principles and techniques of early childhood development. While the emphasis should be on early childhood education, parents should also receive advice and assistance on the health and social aspects of child development with services coming through the school as a child development service center to the home. This will obviously involve health and social service agencies working with school systems in development of the whole child approach.

The neighborhood school, in its new role as a child development center, should be alert to severe cases of child abuse and malnutrition. The child development center can be alert for indications of physical and mental handicaps in very small children so that early attention can ameliorate the severity of limitations from such handicaps.

The neighborhood school library can become a source of information on child development to parents of preschoolers. Educational toy lending libraries, clinics and learning seminars can be housed at the school. With decreases in birth rates and declining elementary school enrollments, many of our schools will already have space available to house and host these services.

By placing emphasis on education, we will be reaching the minds of both parent and preschooler. By placing emphasis on the home we will, as I see it, accrue the following advantages:

(1) It will center in one place the services to be offered in helping parents to provide comprehensive child development service that touches the whole child.

(2) It will strengthen the home by placing responsibility where it belongs. We are all concerned about government as big brother. We would put our emphasis on each home doing as much as possible for child development with assistance when needed from the center.

(3) It will reach the child in the earliest months of life when the timing is right so that neglect and oversight of needs will be kept to a minimum.

(4) It will create and strengthen the proper working relationship between parent, child, and school.

(5) It will not cost as much money as would be the case with education, health and social service agencies working independently as they now do.

(6) Home-based preschool programs under school assistance will avoid premature placement of the child in the school before he is mature enough to leave the nurture of the home. It will also provide a natural bridge for the child to cross at less stress and pain when he reaches kindergarten age.

This program should be financed as part of the state aid programs for schools. The States should include comprehensive programs of financial support for home-based early childhood development under neighborhood elementary school sponsorship. This will involve funds for teaching parents in evening school programs, for providing both health services and health education programs, and for providing physical facilities

at the school for social workers and mental health people to use as they carry out their responsibilities.

Those of us who control the schools should take the initiative to redefine the role and expand the mission of the neighborhood elementary school as a child development center. We should reach out to other agencies as well as to parents.

The major thrust of the States in the field of early childhood development should be to the homes through the school districts' neighborhood elementary schools. The State Boards of Education should take the lead in building this new role for schools. The potential is great, and it appears to me that, with all the current interest and attention on early childhood and child development, the time for action is now.

The kind of conversion I am suggesting could take place entirely within one county school district where the school board and the county health and welfare services have a common desire to work out the details of cooperation. And I don't minimize the importance of those details or the difficulties in working them out.

But I am certain that the goal--to help parents understand and encourage the healthy growth of their children- is one shared equally by all those concerned with health, welfare and education in a neighborhood. The potential gains in human and economic terms for the community are huge.

There is yet another factor which, I believe, assures constructive action now. As professional educators we have an obligation to do our best for all our students. We now know that the early childhood

experiences have a profound effect on a child's capacity to gain from what we teach. We cannot turn our backs on any aspect of a child's life and growth without diminishing to some extent our right to be called "teacher".

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